

CHAPTER 182

October 26, 2011

“More love letters?”

Justin had been on his way home from school, backpack thrown over his shoulder when he passed by Naoto, still shuffling through letters in her hands. Seemed she was pretty annoyed too, given the expression on her face. In a way, Justin found it amusing how annoyed she was getting as she went through letter after letter. How many love letters could she possibly get in one day? You’d think people would get the hint after a while. In truth, Justin probably shouldn’t have cared about the love letters, and really, he kind of didn’t, but he did think it was humorous watching Naoto have to put up with even the slightest of inconveniences. Maybe she **SHOULD** just throw these in the trash where anyone could find them; just so the sender would finally get the hint that she wasn’t interested. She sighed a bit as she continued to pass each letter in the stack a quick glance before shoving it into the back of the pile.

“If the idea is to desensitize me to any mysterious letters, I fear it’s slowly starting to work.” Naoto mused out loud. It was getting to a point where she was considering just not looking through these letters. After all, given the laws of probability, the chance that any one of these cards could be relevant to the thievery that took place at the Naoto estate was slim to none. She must have been crazy to think the culprit would be stupid enough to deposit a card in her locker in a heavily monitored establishment such as this. There were security cameras all over the place; so even if he did manage to avoid getting seen and somehow get into the premise long enough to deposit his letter, he would still have digital footage left behind to immediately identify himself. Coming in here to deposit a letter would be one of the dumbest things he could do.

Of course, Naoto’s annoyance on the matter was pretty quickly interrupted by a snort from Justin, the sound of him trying to hold back laughter at the misery Naoto had managed to dig herself into by pretending to be a guy. She couldn’t help but turn about to glare at the boy as he smirked at her, trying to hide his amusement. She was getting real tired of Justin’s high and mighty attitude, though specifically in regards to her. She didn’t **HAVE** to let him do shit in this investigation; she was doing it out of courtesy knowing just what kind of risk he was in if they didn’t solve this mystery, because he had secrets of his own he needed to keep hidden. But in the end, she didn’t have to do that; and if she wanted to, she could kick his sorry ass out to the curb right now. “I don’t see what’s so amusing about this.” Naoto remarked with annoyance, scolding Justin slightly for laughing at her dissatisfaction.

"This is textbook irony; let's not pretend I'm some kind of asshole for laughing at your little plan exploding right in your face." Justin countered, his grin slowly fading into a disapproving frown. The one time he thought he actually smiled around Naoto and she had to turn it into a big thing. You know; being the butt of the joke wasn't always a bad thing, and even if it was, it was nothing to get your panties in a bunch over. After all, a joke is a joke; it's not like Justin, oh I don't know, called her a serial killer or anything. Now that would be a real dick move. Thank god no one would do that; they'd have to be a real cold-hearted bitch to accuse someone of murder without any evidence. Especially if you were to fuck said people over, possibly forever. But nope. None of them had done that; everything was just peachy keen until Justin had to be a douche and laugh at Naoto getting love letters. What an asshole!

"I'm working with a complete imbecile." Naoto sighed with annoyance, shaking her head before turning her attention back to the pile of letters. She was almost done sorting through everything, but then her finger brushed against one of the letters, sending a certain sensation down the length of her fingers that she could tell right now was not a good sign. Her eyes widened for a moment before she precariously pulled one of the letters out from in between the other love notes. This wasn't a love note though. It wasn't signed and it didn't have any heart shaped seals to give away the romantic subtext of its contents. And more importantly, it contained a rather peculiar, but all too familiar material on the inside; its texture and weight being immediately recognizable even from within the sanctuary of the white envelope that encased it.

"See something you like?" Justin joked for a moment as he slowly approached her, trying to peer over her shoulder to get a look at her secret admirer. After all, you never know when you might need some materials for blackmail. What he would blackmail Naoto for, Justin wasn't quite sure; probably something that would either annoy Naoto or keep her as far away as possible. Either would satisfy Justin in the long run; it was just a matter of which would satisfy him more. Well of course the letter wasn't a love letter, something that became clear to Justin as he slowly closed the gap between him and Naoto, spotting that the letter was completely unmarked, pristine condition and all. Justin wasn't stupid; he could tell what this was for and where it come from immediately, as much as he had been teasing Naoto for something else but a moment earlier. It was probably for that reason Naoto was giving him that 'I told you so,' look, as if to tell him to keep his mouth shut from now on on matters he had no knowledge about.

"In a matter of speaking." Naoto remarked sarcastically, tossing the rest of the letters in her hand into her locker for the time being. She'd deal with her love affairs in a moment; for the time being, her concerns were much more focused on catching the thief who had broken into her house and put her family at risk. And I guess to a lesser extent Justin's as well. Naoto didn't like Justin, not one bit, so she just didn't really care if he had his possessions stolen. Her only concerns with his family were

in regards to his sister, who Naoto still felt indebted to, not only because of what had befallen her thanks to Naoto's ingenious plan, but also because it was from her understanding Maya only suffered such a fate because she had dragged Naoto out of the way of the blast. She had essentially bit the bullet on Naoto's behalf, and now Naoto needed to find a way to repay her. Insuring that her or her place of residence was safe from danger was the least she could do for the poor girl.

But that was a matter for another time, for the moment being, Naoto had a letter in her hand that had been sent to her by a criminal; a criminal she was currently pursuing. This was either a curse, or a blessing. One thing was for sure though, he had unintentionally revealed himself to the world, and Naoto could easily get a hold of that information. Once she negotiated possession of the school's security camera footage, this investigation was as good as closed. Until then, however, this letter could spell either success or disaster for her and Justin. It was just a matter of what message the thief wanted to send, if there even was a message this time around. For all Naoto knew, and for all part of her suspected, the card could be completely blank again. "It's unmistakable! Judging by its appearance, it's on the same cardstock, the same size, unsigned just like last time... I'm almost certain this came from the same person." Naoto remarked, holding the envelope up for Justin to see before slipping her finger beneath the slit, attempting to open the white container that housed the criminal's message.

"So he just waltzed into school to slip another blank letter into your locker? Either this is the world's dumbest criminal, or the smartest." Justin mused aloud, circling around Naoto to lean against the locker besides hers. Naoto wasn't sure she agreed about being the smartest, but then, perhaps she didn't take into account that if their culprit marched right into a school and dropped that letter off without getting any attention drawn to him, he had to be pretty damn sneaky or pretty damn clever. Naoto shook her head a bit as she raised the lip of the envelope, revealing the note inside before she tugged at it with a pinch of her index finger and thumb. She ran her eyes over the text for only a brief moment before smiling and turning her gaze towards Justin.

"I'll be sure to check with the administration later to get possession of the security footage... And besides; the card is not blank." Naoto remarked smugly before passing the card off to Justin, handing it off between her middle and index fingers in what seemed like she was trying to get fancy with the way she passed along information. Justin just contributed it to over confidence, though he supposed it was also possible that's how she typically passed things off. Still, he was much too intrigued with the actual letter, the thing that could possibly help them track their culprit down and put a stop to his crimes before he said something or did something he shouldn't have, than he should have. Perhaps he crossed that line when he stole from Naoto, but alas, Justin was much more concerned about his own affairs and problems than some bitch he didn't even like.

Justin grabbed the letter out of Naoto's hand with a quick flick of his wrist, ripping it out of her grasp so that he could investigate the card himself. Seemed a daring move to go from blank cards to something with typing or handwriting on it; after all, the former may have been ridiculous and pointless, but the latter could be traced fairly easily. At least, that's what he had always heard from when his father talked about work. The type of ink could lead you to a specific kind of printer or typewriter, which while not useful on its own, could be cross referenced with other individual evidence. Handwriting COULD be traced back to an individual; there were apparently twelve key points in a person's signature that differentiated from individual to individual, creating a unique style of handwriting that could easily be identified with a good enough writing sample. That is, of course, unless the suspect tried to mask their hand writing. Even then, there were giveaways when someone tried to fake a different kind of handwriting style; so it could still be used to a certain extent. Not that handwriting was going to help them when the letter they received had typing on it, but it did mean Justin had a fairly good idea how they could use this, even if the letter itself wasn't particularly interesting.

"Dear detective, Your prized possessions are in my hand. Can you recover them? The game is afoot. -The Phantom Thief." Justin read aloud from the card, flipping it around once to see if the other side had anything on it before flipping it back. Was the point just to remind Naoto that she had her shit stolen? Because Justin was pretty sure she was well aware of that. Of course, he was sure that was probably not the part that was intended to be interesting. For one, it was a very clear challenge; the culprit was treating this like a game and Naoto it's player. The question was now, did the culprit consider himself her opponent or the dungeon master? Then there was the matter of the signature. He had given himself a name from the looks of it; already trying to get into the history books as the man who stole from 'the Detective Prince.' Kind of pathetic really, though the name itself sure took the cake.

"It seems this is the work of the figure who snuck into the Shirogane estate. The Phantom Thief? How absurd..." Naoto remarked with annoyance with the letter. The very fact that thief was treating this as some sort of twisted game was infuriating in its own right, but when you consider that the thief was giving himself a title, it was quickly devolving into what was comparable to that of a small child using their imagination. Naoto, completely hypocritically after how her shadow had acted mind you, had no time to be dealing with children; even when children were stealing from her. After all, the worst thing you could do to a misbehaving child, a kid throwing a tantrum at the store was to pay attention to their pleas of attention. You had to teach them that if they wanted to get what they want, they had to act like civil human beings. The same could be said of this thief apparently.

"I would have gone with the Phantom Pain." Justin remarked semi sarcastically, wagging his finger tips as if to feign him being creepy. It was pretty obviously a joke, but even then, Naoto just could not adjust to his cynical, sarcastic sense of

humor. She just didn't get how being a prick was funny if you were intentionally being a prick. Purposely annoying is still annoying, after all, and the same applied to being a dick about everything and everyone. She did suppose though that at least his sarcasm wasn't vicious this time around; hell, if anyone was being mocked, it was the Phantom Thief. Naoto had no qualms with a criminal being called names; they lost all right to have any form of respect the moment they held themselves higher than the extent of the law.

"I haven't the time to waste on this. Although... He broke into our estate and sent me this challenge... Leaving this in the police's hands could jeopardize the honor of the Shirogane name..." Naoto mused outloud for a moment, staring at the letter with disapproval and upheaval in her mind. She couldn't tell what her stance should be on this in all honesty. Every fiber of her being said to ignore it; but she was a detective. She couldn't just turn her eyes away from any crime; especially one that jeopardized the safety of her and her grandfather. On the other hand; she was doing exactly what this criminal wanted by playing into his game. Maybe she was just being a bit egotistical, too ashamed to give her rival what he wanted, but she just couldn't bring herself to play into all of this. And now she had a choice, and a difficult one at that. Did she turn her eyes away from her responsibility just to prove a point, or did she sully her family reputation just because she didn't want their culprit to achieve in his goal of getting Naoto to fall into his game. "Argh! That's why I don't like this! I don't want to get involved with this sort of childish game. But... to ignore it only makes me angry!"

"Welcome to the club!" Justin smirked a bit. He wasn't unaware of what he was like when he got pissed off after all, so just the thought of Naoto doing the exact same thing only went to amuse him. Partially because she always judged him for being an asshole, but really, deep down, she was just as much of a dick as he was; just as much a vengeful and angry soul as he was. Perhaps Naoto had caught on to that fact given she had blushed a bit with embarrassment, turning her eyes towards the ground as she slipped the card into her coat pocket. The very thought of being similar to Justin in any regard, especially THAT regard was just a low blow to her dignity. She was a renowned, dignified detective, not some pissed off punk who insisted on blowing everything out proportion and causing trouble wherever he went. She would NOT let herself be compared to Justin like that.

"I beg to differ; I may get angry, but unlike yourself, I actually have respect for the law." Naoto remarked with annoyance, failing to bite her tongue for even a moment longer. She just couldn't stand the thought of being compared to Justin, even if she knew deep down he was right when he said they were both very angry people. She just bottled it up inside while Justin wasn't afraid to exhibit it. I think it goes without saying Justin was immediately offended by Naoto turning this around to insult him for no reason other than they were both angry people.

“Excuse me? What does that even have to do with anything? I’m an asshole so suddenly I have no respect for the law? You know what Naoto, you can shove that silver spoon of yours up your ass. I have plenty of goddamned ‘respect for the law.’” Justin rebutted with annoyance. She thought she was so much better than everyone else, but in truth, she was just some bitch who tried to hide her true nature behind fancy words and good intentions. But alas, it took more than class to be a likeable person; especially when you were around people like Justin, who could see right through the lies and bullshit. Naoto shook her head before slamming her locker shut, turning to walk straight past her locker, past Justin, and out the front door; adjusting her hat the whole way there.

“Which is why you’re carrying an illegal firearm in your pants right now.” Naoto remarked snidely as she brushed right past him. Well, you could imagine Justin’s shock as she pointed that out, eyes widening as his gaze slowly shifted to the bulge in his pants where his revolver had been. It was subtle, but apparently not subtle enough to get past Naoto.

“Note to self; only carry around the gun attached to my crotch from now on.”